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First breeding record of the Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* for the Indian subcontinent in Changthang, Ladakh, and identification characters of Upland Buzzard and Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

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This paper presents the first breeding records of Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* for the Indian subcontinent, in Ladakh. One nest was found in 1998, and two nests containing near fully fledged young were observed in 1999. Identification characters to aid the separation of Upland Buzzard and Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Breeding of the Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* has long been suspected to occur in the Tibetan facies of the Himalaya from Kashmir to Sikkim (Jerdon 1862, Donald 1920, Baker 1928, 1935, Ripley 1982, Inskipp and Inskipp 1991, Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Ali and Ripley (1978), and the above mentioned sources, describe the Upland Buzzard as a rare winter visitor to the Himalaya (Kashmir to Bhutan and Punjab), while Roberts (1991) excludes its occurrence from Pakistan. The Upland Buzzard's main breeding range comprises the Central Asian highlands from eastern Tien Shan and Altai, east through southern Siberia and Mongolia to western Manchuria south to central China, and south to southern Tibet. Its breeding habitat throughout its range comprises open steppe, dry grassy areas, plateaus and wide valleys with rocky areas for breeding at altitudes over 5,000 m, or mountainous country (Dementiev *et al.* 1966, Thiollay 1994). It winters in the Himalaya, eastern China and Korea. Circumstantial evidence of breeding in the Indian subcontinent has been recorded through sight records and unidentified buzzards at two nests during June/July in Nepal at 4,050 and 3,900 m, but hampered by possible confusion with Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* (Inskipp and Inskipp 1991). Breeding throughout its range, including Ladakh, extends mainly from April to July. The species usually nests on overhanging ledges and in crevices on crags or steep rocky outcrops (Dementiev *et al.* 1966, Brown and Amadon 1968, Thiollay 1994). This paper gives details of the first confirmed breeding records of the species for the Indian subcontinent, made during surveys by RN.

BREEDING RECORDS

The Changthang, literally meaning Northern Plain, lies in the north-eastern region of Ladakh. It is a high altitude, cold desert plateau, ranging from 4,000 to 7,000 m, geographically contiguous with the Tibetan Plateau of the same name. The Changthang fauna has a closer affinity to Tibet than the rest of Ladakh. The Upland Buzzard was sighted in Changthang on seven occasions over two surveys in September 1997 and June 1998. The identity of a breeding pair at Hanle in Changthang in June 1998 was confirmed by DF from photographs taken by RN. The nest was inspected and observed for three hours. In July 1999 seven sightings (including two nests) were recorded. The species was seen around Chushul, between Chushul and Hanle, at Lal Pahari and Rongo (Hanle valley) and in the immediate vicinity of Hanle, at Puga and Tso Kar, where habitat comprised a mix of marshy plain and steep rocky outcrops (Fig. 1). A report by Pfister (1999) of the complete leg of an Upland Buzzard recovered from an extremely large pellet of an Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* at Lal Pahari supports my observations. It was also seen along green fertile river valleys and marshes near Chang-pa dwellings and alongside mixed domestic herds perched on the ground adjacent to rodent burrows. It mainly hunts from vantage perches on rocky mounds or outcrops (which afford a wide view), swooping directly onto prey.

No other buzzard species was observed during the surveys. Breeding was confirmed on 22 June 1998 near Ponguk village, Hanle. In 1999 active nests were observed at Hanle on 23 July and at Puga on 25 July; both nests contained a single almost fully fledged young. A nest located in mid-July at Puga by Gole (1978) ascribed to the Long-legged Buzzard was most likely that of the Upland Buzzard. The nest at Ponguk village, Hanle, was in a huge crevice below the topmost ridge of an overhanging rock. It was lined with twigs of *Caragana versicolor*, grass, and a wide array of available man-made items, among which were cotton, woollen rags, plastic coated cables and strands of manila rope. Rocks below the nest were liberally spattered with the bird's chalk-white droppings. The nest contained two, greyish downy young, observed on 22 June. The other nest at Hanle (near the monastery) and the one at Puga were on low, more accessible rocky outcrops; at these sites the nestledges were much smaller. In Ladakh, prey remains of woolly hare *Lepus oiostolus*, pika *Ochotona* and rodents such as voles and mice, among unidentified items, were found littered below the nests. Prolonged observations were not possible.

IDENTIFICATION

The Long-legged Buzzard and the Upland Buzzard form a superspecies with partially overlapping breeding ranges in the Central Asian highlands (Thiollay 1994).

Although the Upland Buzzard is mostly confined to higher ground, it does descend to lower altitudes for the winter (Dementiev *et al.* 1966). The field identification of the species has been covered by Dementiev *et al.* (1966), Brown and Amadon (1968) and Morioka *et al.* (1998), but separation of the two remains problematic. Dark birds of both species have blackish brown body feathers, and the remiges and rectrices show broader barring than in paler individuals. The tail barring can be very similar in the two species. The dark morph birds (one dark individual was seen twice at Lal Pahari) are perhaps best identified by non-plumage characters, such as the extent of tarsal feathering or general bulkiness. Table 1 attempts to highlight the most obvious and reliable differences between the two species, characters which enable the species to be separated in most cases. However, we are not familiar with the entire spectrum of individual variation in these variable species, and there are probably individuals which cannot be identified using the characters described.

The main plumage differences between the species are to be found in the following feather tracts, which should be carefully studied; dorsally: uppertail and upperwing-coverts and primaries; ventrally: head and upper breast, belly, flanks, tibial feathering ('trousers' or 'leggings'), underwing-coverts and remiges. Other differences include general shape in flight and extent of tarsal feathering (best seen when perched).

Accurate buzzard identification would undoubtedly help in understanding the distribution and status of buzzards in the Indian subcontinent. The Upland Buzzard could well be breeding in high altitude areas of the Himalaya, besides Ladakh, from Garhwal to Bhutan, wherever there is habitat reminiscent of Tibetan facies. Its global status is poorly known and good field identification characters need to be published to facilitate separation from other buzzards.

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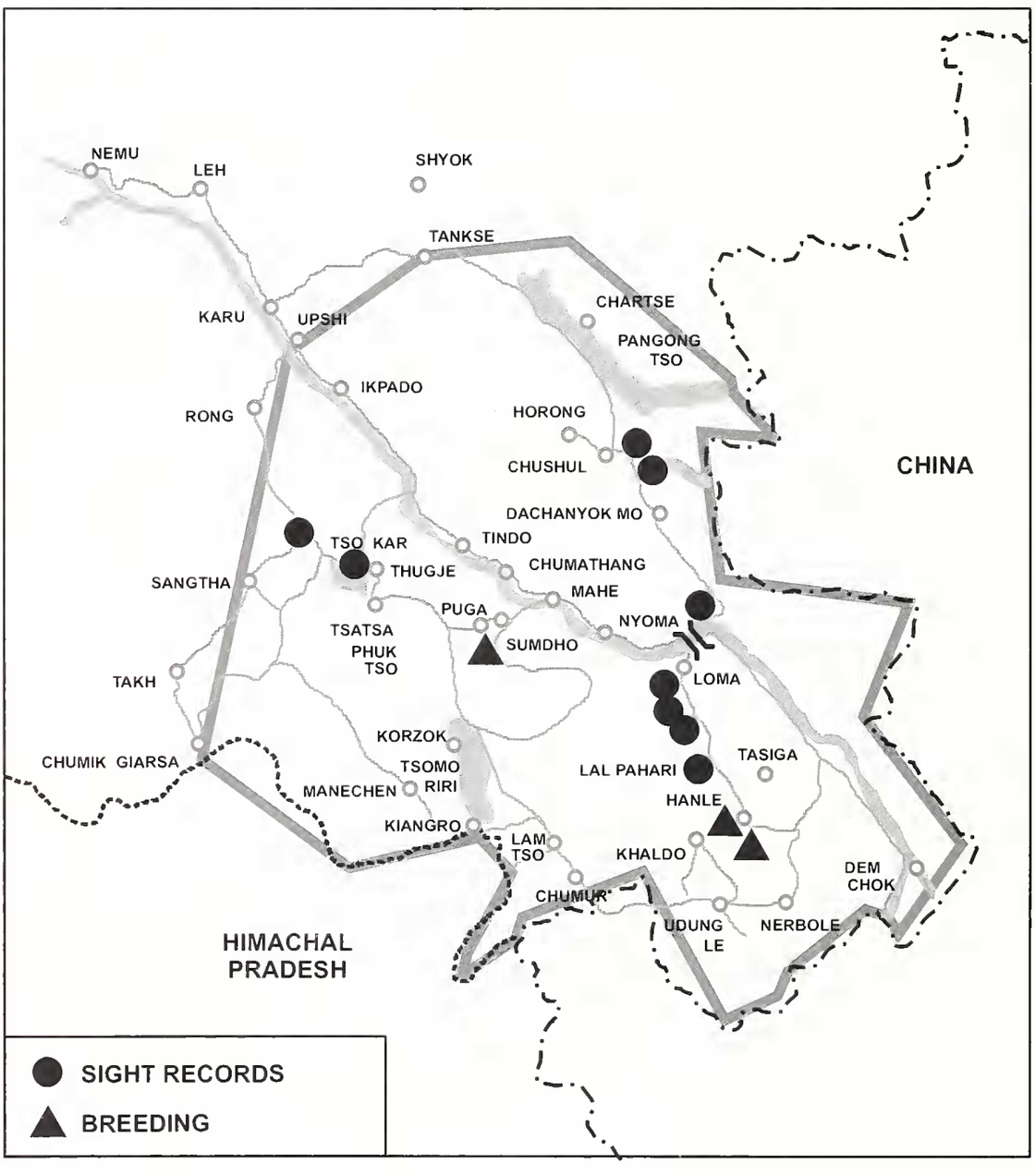

Figure 1. Map of Changthang, Ladakh

Almost fledged young at nest. Hanle, Ladakh, July, 1999. Rishad Naoroji.

Dark morph adult. Difficult to separate from dark morph of Long-legged Buzzard. Tibet/ China, May,1996. Markku Saarinen.

Possibly 3rd calendar year (second summer) immature? Eyes not as dark as in full adult and tail more strongly banded tail than in full adult. Tibet/ China, May/June, 1996. Tom Lindroos.

Possibly 3rd calendar year (second summer) immature? Note tail barring, which is typically of this species largely confined to outer tail. Tibet /China. 31 May, 1996. Hannu Kormano.

Adult. Note pale breast band, heavily marked underwing-coverts (rufous with some transversal bars) and dark carpal patches, and dark flanks and dark thighs often appear as a narrow dark 'U' on belly. At close quarters coarse barring visible on flight-feathers. Buffy tail shows variable rufous smudges towards tip. Tibet/China. May/June 1996. Tom Lindroos.

Table 1. Identification characters of Upland and Long-legged Buzzards

Character	Upland Buzzard	Long-legged Buzzard
Tail pattern	Barring on average broader and sparser. Feathers not uniformly coloured but showing distally brownish, greyish or orange tips and edges, while feather centres and bases are mostly white.	In some individuals uniformly white with orange distal parts. Barring on average finer, denser and less distinct, either over entire length of feather (juveniles) or showing just a few bars near tip (sub-adults and adults).
Head and throat /foreneck	Mostly darker and more heavily patterned than upper breast. Dark malar stripe mostly obvious.	Mostly pale and not contrasting with upper breast.
Pectoral band	Pale and mostly distinct , contrasting sharply with darker bib of upper breast and darker flanks.	Usually no obvious pectoral band (merges with pale upper breast).
Belly	Central belly mostly pale.	Central belly mostly dark.
Flanks	Appears dark, with distinct dark barring in adults (juveniles?).	Dark, either uniformly coloured or spotted / streaked, but not distinctly barred.
Lesser underwing-coverts	Mostly darker than rest of underwing coverts creating dark patagium, like in Common *B. buteo* and Steppe Buzzard *B. buteo vulpinus*.	Similar in colour and pattern as rest of underwing coverts.
Remiges from below	Barring distinct and broader.	Barring less distinct and finer.
Lesser and median upperwing-coverts	Greyish brown, general appearance dark.	Sandy brown to orange with dark centres, general appearance pale.
Wingflash on primaries above	Wide and white. In juvenile pure white and unbarred (only fingers and trailing edge dark), in adult white flash variable in size and showing dark barring and prominent black trailing edge.	In juveniles wider and whiter than in adults, but mostly smaller than in Upland Buzzard, mostly also either barred or mixed with some brown. In adult greyish with darker bars, sometimes some whitish towards leading edge of wing; dark trailing edge not as black as in adult Upland Buzzard.
Tibial feathering (leggings / trousers)	Dark, often the darkest tract on the entire underparts.	Mostly dark, but rarely the darkest area, usually merging with darkish belly.
Tarsal feathering	Tarsi feathered, often completely, but at least for 2/3 of length.	Tarsi appear bare (only upper 1/3 feathered, hidden under leggings).
Flight silhouette	Adult appears shorter-tailed and broader-winged and hence bulkier and heavier than adult Long-legged. (Differences between juveniles not studied).	Adult appears lighter built than adult Upland owing to narrower wings and longer tail. (Differences between juveniles not studied).

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